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SUBJECT: Tasmania: Opposition Struggling to Find Foothold

Ref: Melbourne 144

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Summary

1. (SBU) During a December 1-2 visit to Tasmania, political leaders told Consul General that the Labor party has maintained popularity despite recent political scandals due to a relatively weak opposition. The Greens continue to play a balance of power role in the state and are pushing to return Tasmania's parliament to its original 35 members from the current 25. Tasmania's opposition struggles with differentiating itself from the Labor government and has thus far been unable to find a foothold. End Summary.

No "There" Over There

2. (SBU) Despite the recent resignation of two state ministers over stress and an attempted suicide, Tasmania's Labor party remains optimistic. Tasmanian Premier David Bartlett estimates that his party has a 50 percent chance of winning a majority in the next state elections, a 40 percent chance of forming a government in alliance with the Green party and only a 10 percent chance of the Liberal party winning enough seats to form a majority government. (Note: The next Tasmanian state election must be called before March 17, 2010. End note.) The last major poll, published in November, showed the Labor party winning 40 percent of a hypothetical vote, the Liberals at 35 percent and the Greens at 23 percent. Gary Bailey, editor of Tasmania's daily, The Mercury, noted that the opposition is "not making any headway" in Tasmania and believes that the next election will be Labor's to lose.

3. (SBU) Will Hodgman, leader of the state opposition, presented a grim outlook for the Tasmanian Liberal party. He said that it has been a "long-hard grind" in the opposition and acknowledged that his party has struggled to differentiate itself from the Labor party. Hodgman has attempted to brand the Liberals as the party of change, but stated that waging an ideological battle at the state level is difficult when most voters are simply concerned about the delivery of state services. The Liberals, Hodgman said, have not taken advantage of the Labor party's recent troubles because he did not want to see his party branded as being "too negative." He stated that he does not see a long-term future in his present role as leader of the opposition and admitted that he is a "small l" liberal, identifying more with the U.S. Democratic party than the Republican party.

The Kingmakers

4. (SBU) The Hare-Clark proportional electoral system (explained below) in Tasmania has permitted the emergence of a significant third party, the Greens. Nick McKim, the Green party leader, stated that the Greens have played an important role in Tasmania by forming coalitions with either the Liberal or the Labor parties. He stated

that he would work with either party depending on what "was better for Tasmania." McKim did say, however, that he had a previous affinity for the Labor party and believes that the Liberal party has no "up and coming" leaders. Turning to the future, McKim stated that he was focused on gaining another seat in the next state election. While a Premiership may not be in the Green's immediate future, obtaining a fifth lower house seat would enable the party play a more significant role in balance of power parliaments.

¶5. (U) The Green party controls four of the state's 25 lower house seats, with Labor presently holding 14 seats and the Liberals holding only seven. The Hare Clark system allows candidates (all from multi-member constituencies) to be elected if they receive a minimum quota of 16.7 percent of eligible votes. Once a candidate crosses the 16.7 percent quota, the votes are transferred to the next candidate in line. This system was designed to minimize "wasted" votes and to ensure that voters express their preference for individual candidates rather than party lists.

Expand the Parliament?

¶6. (SBU) Nick McKim, Gary Bailey and Supreme Court Justice Pierre Slicer all agreed that the lower house of the Tasmanian parliament should be returned to its original 35 members. The lower house was reduced by an act of Tasmania's parliament in 1998 to its current form of 25 members. (Comment: The Labor/Greens and Liberal/Greens coalition governments of the late 1980s and early 1990s are widely regarded as having been disasters. Limiting the influence of the greens was one of the reasons the lower house was reduced from 35 to 25 seats. End comment.) In addition to curtailing the influence of third parties, observers say that the lower house is "not working properly" because the talent pool is too shallow to allow younger members to develop as leaders. As Justice Slicer pointed out, a parliament of 25 members stymies the "training ground of the back

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bench." Nick McKim believes that an act of state parliament would be necessary to return the lower house to 35 members.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) The opposition in Tasmania is pessimistic and appears to have accepted the improbability of winning a majority in the next state election. Will Hodgman is a confessed social liberal who has struggled to differentiate his party from the Labor government. While he may step down as leader prior to the next state elections, a change of the guard may not be enough to clinch a Liberal victory.

THURSTON